How People Learn
Alumni Profiles
Elaine Townsend Utin

ELAINE TOWNSEND UTIN: My name is Elaine Townsend Utin. I'm the Co-Executive Director of NC-SLI, a high school scholars program for Latinx high school students and their families. And I graduated from the Technology Innovation Education cohort in 2016.

So as executive director of NC-SLI, I wear a lot of different hats. I am in charge of curriculum development. I also host and kind of facilitate the programming and the workshops, the classes that our scholars are going through. So it's an exciting time to be able to work with scholars, and also our instructors, and our team that we have that are facilitating these lessons.

And at the end of the day, it's really powerful to be able to be in these spaces to have these conversations with students who are pursuing their dreams and specifically higher education.

NC-SLI is a high school scholar program dedicated to serving, uplifting, and advocating for Latinx high school students and their families. Our students are the first generation here in the United States or the second generation. They'll also be the first in their family to attend college.

So this, in addition to coming from low income backgrounds, it's so important to be able to provide the resources, the community, the safe space for students to be able to explore what their dreams are, what their careers are, what their passions are at the same time receiving information on how to plan for your career how to plan for college.

It's a powerful program, a big community, a big family, and we're here pushing North Carolina to address the needs that we have, but the same time advocating for our families, for ourselves to get to the next step in our careers.

While I was studying here at HGSE, I had the opportunity to be exposed to so many different types of learning, to really examine what learning is, and how do we design spaces for people to consume information, or to internalize it, to all of these different aspects of learning, creating, and designing.

And that was a really transformational experience for me, because it really helped me stretch my imagination when it came to creating spaces for others to learn, others to participate, others to engage, specifically youth.

And also thinking about media and how it's impacting our current generation, but also past generations. It's been a really awesome opportunity to be able to apply that to the work that I do now as a curriculum developer and also as an instructor.

When I was choosing courses here at HGSE, I was specifically seeking out classes that could help my understanding and my growth and my theory about serving communities of color, serving marginalized communities across the US. And so when it came to learning about our histories and the importance of engaging youth-- specifically in learning our histories and our ancestry-- it was a very transformational experience when it came to apply now to my work.

As a curriculum developer working with Latinx students in North Carolina, it's so important that they're able to understand why we're here in this moment. I think having to face a lot of different barriers that exist, whether that's because of her immigration status, or because of the color of her skin, et cetera, it's so important to have an understanding of who you are. And when you have a strong sense of understanding of who you are, I believe that you're able to learn in a way that it frees your mind to be able to explore new concepts, new topics, because we ourselves identify as learners.

And we have broken down those stereotypes. In the messages that tell us that we're not, and we're not good enough to learn, and we're not intelligent et cetera, et cetera. So that-- being able to dive into those kinds of dialogues with my peers, with faculty members was so important for me to be able to hone in on what I believe learning is and how students should be free to do that.

How do we engage them where they're at? How do we bring information to them in ways that they like to consume, in the ways that they're engaging right now? And so one of the ways that we've been able to do that is through it reimagining how we use Snapchat. Thinking about the information that we typically would disperse in an email, but formatting it and taking that information, condensing it into ways that they're consuming it.

And that has just increased the engagement that we've experienced on our programs. Students are excited that adults are willing to change their ways to meet them, and do things that they enjoy, and be able to adapt to the ways that they're learning and consuming information.

When thinking about different theories that incorporate user experience, for example, I think that there's still a lot of gaps when it comes to how youth are considered in the development of creation-- of creating different products, of creating different technology in specifically something like email. That has been dated forever, right? Like and hasn't necessarily been revolutionized in a way that's really reaching a different type of user, which I feel like is youth, and how they're consuming information.

So being able to think about students and our scholars as users of the information that we're just distributing and dispersing has really just reframed the way that I approach technology, and how we create information to reach and engage our students.

When we're thinking about how to motivate students intrinsically to be able to learn and how

do they take on that ownership for themselves, I think again, the way that information is created and shared is so important. Thinking critically about that. We found that by engaging students in the ways that they found that they learn best, whether that's through the visual learning, through audio et cetera. And all these different ways of learning, we found that students are even more motivated to engage.

They feel like their needs are being met, even when that comes down to a simple assessment form. And seeing the feedback that they give towards being able to incorporate into the way that we design our lessons, the way that we implement our workshops, they see their voices are being heard. And that motivates them to continue engaging, because they are started taking ownership over their learning and how they engage in our program.

We are trying to change the narrative that has been placed on our immigrant community and our Latinx community and other marginalized communities here in the United States, and specifically in North Carolina. As we advocate and we support our scholars in their learning, in developing their own agency over their future and their own learning, we're able to contribute to this cycle that's going to impact our communities and also the world around us.

As we have a deeper understanding of our history, of where we come from, it is creating a clear path to our goals and to be able to achieve them, and be able to learn and to engage in concepts and different ideas. And be able to also have this mutual exchange with other people. And be able to mobilize as a community towards greater social good.